

SAINT TOWN

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Abstract

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Saint Town is a collection of short stories that focus on Mexican American women living in a fictional United States town. This thesis examines the generational gaps between immigrants/first generation Latinx people and second/third generation Latinx people. The themes touched on in this work include class, mental health, gender, religion, immigration, and culture. This thesis explores the more ‘Americanized’ experiences second- and third-generation Latinx people undergo. By framing these stories through a first-person lens, the reader will be able to perceive the disparities between the generations and understand how culture dictates characters’ decisions. *Saint Town* attempts to illustrate the rise of individualism within this community and its clash with the Latinx expectations that surround the characters.

The terms Latinx and Mexican American will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Mexican Americans fall under the category of Latin-American people. Latinx is the gender-neutral and non-binary umbrella term for people of Latin American origin. It is used in order to account for everyone in the community and to respect their identities.

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Artist's Treatise

Introduction

Saint Town is a collection of short stories that encapsulates a variety of themes and explores both culture and society as characters experience them. Each story will either analyze, attempt to explain, or critique aspects of the culture and society that surround the protagonists. All of the main characters in these stories will be part of the Latinx community, focusing on the contemporary Mexican American community. All four stories are set in a fictional town which has been nicknamed Saint Town. I gave the stories a single setting to create a uniformity, to have each story and character play off the town's dynamics, and to guide the themes of irony and rebellion throughout the collection.

Saint Town is heavily populated by Mexican American people. Because of this, the population of the town seemingly buys into the traditional Mexican American and Latinx values immigrants upheld when they came to the United States. The nickname 'Saint Town' gives off the expectation that its residents will be honest, law-abiding citizens with morals they follow. As the thesis goes on, readers will find there are no saints in Saint Town. Instead, they will find characters who make mistakes and either attempt to learn from them or don't. This nickname is used to create a sense of irony. These chaotic plots and the ensuing irony may stem from the various characters' departure from the cultural values and beliefs their predecessors followed. This departure is natural. As generations progress and people assimilate into the American society, the beliefs and values of those before them seemingly disappear. Along with irony, the theme of rebellion is evident in these short stories. The word rebellion should be taken as the shift away from the traditional values and beliefs found in Mexican American culture. This is the

unspoken struggle within my thesis. No character can put a finger on it or even mentions this disconnect they feel. It is simply ingrained in the story as it would in real life.

The slow loss of culture and values is also a theme and points to the underlying change in this town. This was done in order to mirror the characters' search for identity and belonging. As second- and third-generation Latinx people in America, they no longer feel as though they can relate to those who came before them, but they do not fully fit in with their white counterparts. They are in limbo, stuck between buying into the values those who came before them had and realizing they do not endorse certain religious sentiments, toxic familial structures, the denial of mental health issues, and more. Though they may not endorse these ideals they find them so pervasive in the society around them that it feels almost impossible to stray away from them. I do believe this is a loss for my characters, but not the loss of culture, because Latinx people do not cease to be Latinx simply because they do not value what those before them valued.

These characters' struggles are no longer about their immigration status or how to rise above the second-class standing of earlier generations. There are characters in these stories that are professionals, students in college, students in medical school, and young adults studying for the LSAT. My main characters are part of the generations who are benefiting from the struggles of those before them. Their issues are seemingly more 'American' because of this. The protagonists, assimilated Mexican Americans, might have been seen as rebels by their first-generation parents and immigrant grandparents. Still, there is a sort of peer pressure ingrained in the culture and values within Saint Town. Rejecting this pressure to conform to tradition allows the characters to become vocal about their own beliefs and values.

Apart from including the impact of generational change on a community as a whole, much of my focus within these stories is to challenge stereotypes and overused Mexican

American imagery/tropes. Instead, I hope to show the extensive and varied experiences of Latinx descendants. These experiences will be explored within the characters' lives and the themes each story will focus on. For example: Latinx people are thought to place value on patriarchy, so every story will have a female protagonist who offers a varied perspective on the Latinx community, one seen as always valuing family ties, yielding to machismo, and being subservient to husbands and sons. The characters in my stories will reject these outdated familial structures. Some older Latinx people do not believe mental illness exists, so there will be characters who are harmed by this notion. Latinx people are stereotyped as being hyper-religious, so I will write a character who rejects Catholicism and critiques religious practices. The themes I focus on assisted me in structuring these short stories in a way that challenges the community I place the characters in.

The themes and storylines will push back on, explore, and critique issues of class, mental health, gender, religion, immigration, and culture. The stories examine recurring thematic issues often seen in second- and third-generation Latinx people.

Goals

The most direct aspect of storytelling is narration. Because of this, it is imperative to take note of the way a story is being told and whose perspective it is coming from. First-person narration allows readers to enter the mind of someone they have never met. It is this kind of narration which feels most intimate and offers a sense of relatability to the character and the plot. This is the point of view I chose for all of my stories. My main goal with this method of storytelling is to immerse readers in a plotline which may seem foreign, and yet still offer some aspects they can relate to, which also leads to the stories' believability.

Another goal I wish to accomplish within this thesis is to challenge the idea of the American ‘*novela*’ and the stereotypes the media places on Latinx people. Telenovelas are extremely popular within Latinx culture. They are forms of serious entertainment for older women and sources of memes for younger generations. Because of their popularity, Latinx films and TV shows produced in the U.S. with English-speaking actors often get branded as *novelas*. For example, the sitcoms *Jane the Virgin* and *Ugly Betty*, both have Latina main characters and should have been seen as groundbreaking, yet they followed the same formula as the Latinx telenovela. Latinx people seem to be cast exclusively as the lead in shows where they are made to give unusually outlandish performances and engage in storylines with hyper-dramatic antics.

On the other hand, in mainstream media Latinx people are usually typecast as the ‘help’ – maids, kitchen staff, manual laborers, or minimum-wage workers. These stereotypes in the media have become so prevalent that Latinx people are viewed broadly in only this very limited way. In reality, Latinx people have vastly different identities and can be found in many different sectors of society. Latinx people deserve representation that reflects everyone in the community. I want to help create this representation and to amplify the writers who are already working at creating this distinction. Seeing a main character of color in these stories will push back on the stereotypes that have misrepresented and distorted this particular culture.

My third goal with this thesis was to explore the meaning of Latinx literature in the current academic climate. To summarize, I believe that the characters in Latinx literature may find themselves with more ‘American’ struggles which will be influenced by their culture, family, and backgrounds. My introduction explores the genre in the section titled ‘A Word on Latinx Literature.’

My final goal in this thesis is to show the divide between immigrants/first generation Latinx people and second/third generations. This divide can be seen in any culture and race that has immigrated to this country, but my focus will be on issues specific to the Latinx community and especially to Mexican Americans.

The following are questions I am asking for my audience to consider:

- What does it mean to think differently than your grandparents or parents?
 - Does this mean you are going against your culture since these values are integral parts of it?
 - Does this mean you are a type of rebel?
- Are you losing your culture as these generations go on?
 - Can culture even be lost? Or can people in said cultures work to redefine it?

My stories challenge us and force my characters to consider their surroundings before making a decision. I wanted to go further with my stories and explore aspects of culture, generational gaps, morals, and questions about the literary genre they might fall under.

These stories are just a glimpse at the distinct experience of second and third generation Latinx people in America and it begs one central question: where do these stories fit?

A Word on Latinx Literature

In this thesis I use the terms Latinx and Mexican American interchangeably. Latinx is the gender-neutral and gender non-binary term for Latin Americans, or Latinos. Mexican Americans fall under the umbrella of Latin Americans, therefore are Latinx. I believe this term is welcoming and accepting of all identities in these communities. ‘Latinx’ is more inclusive of experiences within the U.S. because it is less about nation of origin and more about individual identity.

According to the Princeton University LGBT Center, the term surfaced online in 2004 but gained traction in 2014 (Gamio). Latinx is mostly used by academics, students, and by social media users (Gamio). There are many people of Latinx descent who do not agree with the usage of 'Latinx.' They believe it to be an Americanized version of the word 'Latino' or an attempt to change the Spanish language (Hatzipanagos). Others see the term as an elitist invention which addressed the issue of gender identity, which some did not see as an urgent priority in their community (Nuño-Pérez). Some believe that the issues of immigration, crime, health, and education are more pressing and should have been addressed first. I agree that these issues are important and should be paid attention to. However, they require years of systematic and political change. The word 'Latinx' does not. It was introduced on the internet as a replacement for a word people were not comfortable using to describe themselves.

I still utilize the term 'Mexican Americans' in this thesis because it is not gendered and therefore does not leave anyone who identifies as gender-neutral or non-binary behind. I made my characters Mexican American in order to focus on one community that has traditionally been painted in a negative light. I wanted to give this community, my community, better representation and show the changes and growth within this demographic. Even so, I use the word 'Latinx' in order for my audience to consider the experiences within these stories to be part of the universal Latinx community as a whole.

Past literature written by people of Mexican American descent is not typically identified as Latinx literature because, again, this word did not exist until recently. Some Latinx literature deals with immigration, loss, the struggle to establish oneself within the United States, and the search for identity. Some well-known examples of this are Américo Paredes' *The Hammon and the Beans and Other Stories* (1994) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). The themes

and plotlines found in these works will continue to be present in today's Latinx literature as they continue to impact the community. In the current political climate, we can expect more immigration centered Latinx literature, like Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004), to emerge and to be in conversation with literature written by second and third generation Latinx people in America. However, as the generations go on these themes and plotlines have shifted and they will continue to shift. The characters in Latinx literature may find themselves with more 'American' struggles which will be influenced by their culture, family, and backgrounds – this is what my thesis is modeled after.

Latinx literature such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993), Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996), Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), Erika L. Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), and more focus on the experience of Latinx people in the United States when it comes to finding their identity. This search for identity means discovering their own values, vices, sexualities, and passions. They also bring light to families who have always been on the U.S. side of the border. These works respond to the literature that focuses on immigration by making it clear that subsequent generations will still feel the loss their predecessors did and that the search for identity remains constant. Though the plotlines in these works may be different, the culture and feelings do not change.

In an interview with *Smithsonian Magazine*, the editor of the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, Ilan Stavans, cited some of the common themes he found in the Latinx writings they included in the anthology: the search for home, the tension between rebellion and consent, gender, alienation, language, and a quest for validation (Schama). I attempt to touch on all of

these themes within my thesis as to adhere to the common themes of Latinx literature. Stavans also states he believes Latinx literature will become “so integrated into the DNA of mainstream culture that it will be very difficult to distinguish [Latinx literature from American literature]” (Schama). As generations go on, Latinx literature may change the typical understanding of American literature and the two may become intertwined. I attempt to confirm this statement in my thesis.

When I began my time at the University of Texas at Austin, I wanted to study the literary works of people whose backgrounds I shared. Though these classes were limited, they exist. These classes range from the Latinx Short Story, Mexican American Literature and Culture, Latinx Young Adult Literature, Literature for Writers, Life/Literature U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, and more. I was fortunate enough to be able to have two extremely knowledgeable Latinx professors, who taught Literature for Writers and the Latinx Short Story, work on this thesis with me. Some of the most influential writers I have been exposed to in class and discovered on my own are Sandra Cisneros, Carmen Maria Machado, Ana Castillo, and Edwidge Danticat. All shaped my work in *Saint Town*.

Cisneros’ 1991 book of short stories, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, focused on womanhood and the struggles that come with being a Latinx woman. Most characters in this collection come from families who have crossed the border from Mexico and settled in Texas. Cisneros critiques the way women are treated by men and critiques the cultural norm of machismo in her stories. Machismo is a traditional Latinx idea that expects the men to engage in a practice of exaggerated masculinity and self-reliance. What follows from this is the idea that women are inferior to the men who are expected to provide while women raise children and take care of the home. This notion is still present in Latinx households and is an overarching

influence on second and third generations. In some of Cisneros' stories the Latinx experience of machismo is an overarching theme. In others it is in the background, silently influencing the main character. I wanted to follow this example in my thesis.

Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 book of short stories, *Her Body and Other Parties*, also deeply influenced me. I admire Machado's ability to add in multiple layers within her stories. Ranging from sexuality, anger, feminism, mental health, and body autonomy. While reading, I noticed that Machado's characters' races are not explicitly stated; there are no last names in the entirety of this collection. However, her work is considered to be Latinx literature because of her own background as a daughter of Cuban immigrants. In an interview with *Al Día News*, Machado was asked if she considered her work to be distinctly "Latina." She answered, "I think that the type of fiction I write — metafiction, liminal fantasy, magical realism, all written in a lyrical, literary style — has its roots in (Latinx) writers; and I'd like to think that my language has also been influenced by their prose" (Vourvoulias). Apart from being influenced by how she brings race into her work, I also applaud her ability to create characters who are firm in their own opinions. She brings dry humor into her writing in order for a sort of dark comic relief - a way to make a heavy situation a bit lighter while still critiquing said situation.

Ana Castillo's 1993 novel *So Far From God* focuses on the women in a family and their search for identity in New Mexico. Her work critiques religion and challenges the Catholic church's disregard for women. Like Cisneros, Castillo explores the impact of machismo on Latinx women. Castillo's characters all engage in a sort of rebellion which can be linked to going against the norm the generations before them championed. I wanted to bring this theme of rebellion into my own thesis.

Lastly, Edwidge Danticat's 1995 collection of short stories *Krik! Krack!* heavily influenced this thesis. Danticat created a fictional town, Ville Rose, in Haiti where her characters' stories unfold. Ville Rose symbolizes the change which occurs in the town as time progresses because of the generational gaps that ensue. With the fictional town of Saint Town, I follow Danticat's lead in creating a fictional town rather than naming a real town and challenging its community directly. The creation of a fictional town also allowed me to construct the groundwork for the people who live there. I admire Danticat's creation of this setting as well as her themes which focus on gender and generational difference.

The Stories

"Cold Coffee"

This story follows the character of Cat, whose boyfriend, Jamie, gets into a car crash on the working-class side of town where she lives. Meanwhile, Jamie comes from a wealthy Latinx family with an overbearing matriarch who does not approve of Cat. Unlike Cat, Jaime is not engaged with his Latinx heritage. Jamie's family has strayed from their contact with traditional Latinx families because his parents are divorced, while many Latinx families stay intact because of their adherence to traditional family values. Still, his family gives into the concept of machismo, as his mother, Ms. Campo, caters to her son and holds him on a pedestal. Jamie has an opioid addiction that Ms. Campo denies. Cat must figure out how to deal with Jamie's dysfunctional family and his opioid addiction.

Class and family are the overarching themes in this story. I wanted to write a story that depicted how different two people from the same culture can be together and how privilege can lead to families straying from their heritage

“A Meaningful Contrast”

Ella's ex-boyfriend found her on the roof of her apartment building in what appeared to be a suicide attempt. She does not remember what led her to the roof and enters a mental health facility. Readers are introduced to her family and see a connection between Ella and her father who was a patient in the same facility. Ella's mother agrees with the structure machismo brings to the household, while her father rejects it. Her father's mental illness was not addressed until later in his life because of his own mother's reluctance to comprehend it when he was growing up. Ella's story deals with generational trauma and points out the lack of understanding that surrounds mental illnesses in Latinx families.

In this story we explore her family relations and see what led her to the roof. This is meant to show hope for the next generation, which includes her little brother, when it comes to becoming more conscious of their own mental health.

“Pre-Existing Conditions”

As this story opens, Mia, a medical student, learns that her grandmother is dying from endometrial cancer. Her cancer was not correctly addressed by a doctor who does not speak Spanish and could not adequately communicate with her grandparents. Mia decides to fight for her grandmother and to confront this doctor.

There is a noticeable disconnect between her and her grandparents. She also does not know Spanish, so she is not able to fully communicate with them. There is also an aura of superiority on Mia's part, as she tends to believe she has surpassed her family in education and eventually will in profession. Yet, she is aware of the struggles the generations before her had to go through in order for her to be where she is.

This story takes note of the way the healthcare field is not equal and how some doctors will minimize the condition of their more vulnerable patients, such as this doctor did when diagnosing an immigrant woman's pain. It attempts to shed light on the struggle of immigrants when language can create barriers and lead to having less control of their lives.

“Saint Town”

The unnamed narrator in this story is a young woman who discovers she is pregnant during Mass. She rejects Saint Town and believes she does not belong there because of the values her hometown claims to have. She believes the town to be full of hypocrites. This narrator would rather be herself and live out her own beliefs than succumb to those around her. We follow the narrator's stream of consciousness and realize the sinful truth of those who sit in the pews around her. They are unnamed characters and are used to support the narrator's argument that she is not the only one making mistakes.

In “Saint Town,” the value of religion is disposed of by someone with extremely close ties to the church. I believe this story works well to round out the collection. It gives a portrait of the town as a whole and brings in all of the prior introduced characters' vices.

Concluding Thoughts

This thesis is a capstone for all of my academic pursuits during my undergraduate years. My writing and literature coursework, as well as my Plan II Honors education, came together to create a passion for storytelling and addressing Latinx issues.

While my familiarity with Latinx literature assisted me in finding my own voice and style, I was alone when it came to creating the plot for the four stories in this collection. I wanted these stories to be unique, but still have elements that the audience could relate to. I did not write

these stories with one specific audience in mind, and instead focused on showing that Latinx stories and their characters, as with other forms of media, can be relatable.

To accomplish my goals, I used honest, straight-forward narration, lots of setting description, exposition, and emotional description. I avoided including any unreliable narrators because I want my readers to feel they can trust my protagonists and, as result, believe their stories. I paid special attention to my setting description in order to fully render Saint Town and assist the readers in seeing the town - what it looks like and feels like. For example, I used a river as a landmark in order to show the reader how the town is not just divided but also polarized when it comes to class distinction. I focused on exposition to assist the reader in understanding a certain character's motivations and how they could be tied to some form of trauma or character traits. Lastly, I wrote a great deal of emotional description in order to make these characters feel real and allow the readers to sympathize with them.

The ideas for these stories came to me in different ways: at the doctor's office, in class, while studying, while drinking coffee. Writing down my ideas in a notebook was a quick way for me to remember the characters and the issues I wanted to address. While the broad plotlines came easily to me, the writing process was a bit more difficult. I found myself feeling like I was not truly placing these characters on the page when it came to their actions. As I was writing the first drafts, I realized some of my characters were simply heads that the story was stuck inside of. I focused on giving my characters some physical dimension instead of just thoughts. This was challenging because when story ideas came to me, I only heard the character's thoughts. As I continue to write, I hope to address this more and understand that characters are people, albeit fictional, with movements and conversations and facial expressions.

When it came to revisions, I realized my tendency to write run-on sentences and to overuse commas. Looking back on my writing, I noticed that when a scene, inner thoughts, or dialogue came easy to me, I tended to type faster and therefore ignored grammar and structure. I now know that focusing on grammar while writing the story is beneficial and makes it easier on the writer during the editing process. Another issue I ran into was my uneasiness when it came to discarding useless scenes and information. Although it was hard to let go, I learned that characters needed to add something to the story in order for it to stay on track.

There are many stories I still have in my head that could fit into this thesis. This goes to show there are so many ways for audiences to understand more about the theme of generational gaps within the Latinx community.

Throughout my four years as a student at the University of Texas at Austin I have developed as a writer who is concerned with representation in fiction. I find myself writing stories that are realistic and contemporary. When beginning a story, I seem to always place someone of Latinx descent as the main character. I suspect this stems from my yearning to read characters with names like mine and physical characterizations like my own when I was young. Since these characters were scarce, I would create them myself while reading – I'd pretend Hermione from *Harry Potter* and Katniss from *The Hunger Games* were Latinas. As I grew and began to take reading more seriously and see literature as academic, I stopped this practice and began to truly see the lack of Latinx representation in mainstream literature and media.

It felt natural for me to write a creative thesis that dealt with contemporary Latinx issues, primarily because I am experiencing the issues I write about and explore. This thesis was cathartic and allowed me to examine my feelings as I search for my own identity as a second-generation Latina. As I wrote and placed my characters in fictional situations, I was able to go on

their journeys with them. I came to the conclusion that our search for identity and a place in the United States will continue for some time. I do not believe we can have an identity that is completely apart from those who came before us. Our culture is within us and is a dictating influence when it comes to life decisions: Kat's decision to stay with Jamie throughout his addiction and to deal with his overbearing mother; Ella's decision to take her mental health seriously and to reject machismo; Mia's decision to confront the doctor who did not adequately treat her immigrant grandmother; and the unnamed narrator's decision to take ownership of her body and reject Catholicism.

It is difficult to describe what makes literature Latinx. One can say it is the themes, the plotlines, the last names, or the culture. But I believe what makes literature Latinx is the aura of ingenuity and tenacity seen between the lines and in the actions of the characters who in some ways show our struggle between where we have been and where we may be headed.

As generations go on Latinx literature may become more indistinguishable from American literature. The line between the two genres will become more blurred as generations continue to create their identities in America. This is not assimilation; this is inevitable. Immigrants and subsequent generations must make the choice to engage with their heritage and their culture while also staying true to their own personal values and beliefs. It is an everyday struggle, I know firsthand. And it is a paradox which will continue to seep into literature written by Latinx people, one I wish to continue examining. This thesis acts as the foundation for all future works, plotlines, and characters I hope to create.

COLD COFFEE

The hospital in my town is half old and half new. The building is cut in half with worn bricks plastered on one side and steel beams covering the other. I suppose their funding to renovate was limited, so they updated the side of the hospital that mattered: the ER, the trauma floor, the surgical wing, and the lobby. It used to be called the ‘shitty hospital’ by locals. But now, when people walk inside the lobby they are greeted by clear, fluorescent white beams and a sculpture that hangs from the ceiling. A newness that appeals to even the most hopeless of visitors who tread through the automatic doors. I became one of those visitors, the ones that rush to the hospital without even making sure their shoes match all because of an unwelcome call.

I got the call from Jamie around one in the morning. He had been on his way to pick me up from my grandma’s house when he wrecked his car. It had been my cousin’s birthday and, like always, we held a family gathering at my grandma’s house. Everyone brings food or alcohol

– most people just bring alcohol; Tito’s is the favorite. Everyone squeezes their cars into my grandma’s driveway, we usually fit about five with one car’s back end always sticking out into the road. Those who come later in the night park in front of other people’s houses. If my extended cousins decide to come, they’ll have to drive over the sidewalk and park on her lawn.

We start my grandma's parties by talking about the news: if someone’s pregnant or if they aren’t. They always have a very lengthy conversation as to why and when they believe it'll happen. Same conversation goes for marriage. Jamie and I have been the subject of these conversations many times. He usually comes to these parties with me, but he had to study for the LSAT. He should’ve just come. He wouldn’t have gotten in his crash.

I dislike driving late at night, so Jamie offered to drop me off and pick me up after he finished studying. But instead of getting a text from him saying he was outside; I got *the* call.

“Jamie?”

“Cat, I crashed.”

“What? Are you okay?” I pushed through my aunt and uncle to reach the front door and went outside to hear him better.

“It’s bad.”

“Are you okay, Jamie?”

“I can’t tell if I’m hurt or not. But the car is.”

“Where are you?”

I noticed his breathing getting rougher while my own grew rapid.

“Don’t go unconscious!” I begged running back into the house to get my dad’s car keys.

My phone was pressed to my ear with so much force as I tried to desperately hear Jamie breathe. But instead I heard ambulance sirens.

“Oh, thank God, Jamie. They’re there for you! They’re there! They’re going to help you.”

“Please talk to me, Cat.”

“I’m here, Jamie,” I said, rushing back outside to my dad’s car. Only to find that it was locked in by a Toyota and a Ford truck. “Fucking shit!” I said kicking my grandma’s flowerpot over. I saw my mom’s tiny Prius parked on the street, then remembered they came separately and thanked God in my head.

“Are you okay?” Jamie said.

Under my thin shoes, my toe throbbed. “Stop worrying about me, are you?”

“I don’t know.”

I heard muttering on his line.

“Tell me where they’re taking you!” I yelled into the phone when I heard more muffled voices talking to him.

“Please don’t take me to the shitty hospital,” I heard him beg the EMS whose response I couldn’t make out.

I heard movement and then, “Cat, they’re taking me to the shitty hospital.” His voice sounded weaker.

“I’ll be there.”

He hung up and I ran back inside the house. Everyone was talking and drinking as though nothing wrong was happening.

I reached into my mom's purse and switched out my dad's keys for hers. I knew she'd be angry with me for one second, then be worried for Jamie. She loved him and his jokes he'd tell my father and her over the homemade rice he'd devour. I texted her at the first red light I stopped at, "Jamie was in a crash. I took your car to the hospital. Please don't call me. I'll text you when I have news. Sorry!"

Surprisingly, I beat the ambulance there and ran inside to the lobby. I stopped speed walking and looked above me to admire the white sculpture that dangled from the ceiling. It resembled a kind of winged animal that hung over the lobby like a mobile hung a baby's head. Except this mobile hung over distressed and panicked people like a bad omen. Still, it was bright and appealing, and I realized it must have cost a fortune to buy and install. *Maybe it's not the shitty hospital anymore*, I thought.

It was eight in the morning now and the blood that had gotten under Jamie's fingernails had dried and browned. He had an atypical fracture in his right leg and a gash on his right arm along with multiple cuts and bruises. He needed surgery for the leg. But thankfully, no head trauma.

The car that crashed into him had swerved into his lane and hit him, head on. It could have been so much worse. The passenger side of his Audi got most of the impact or, so I'd been told by him in between winces when he was awake. I hadn't seen his car and I didn't want to.

After treating him in the emergency room they brought him up to a very nice private room on the renovated side of the hospital. The room felt cold with its white and gray tones. The only accent of color was the red womb chair that had a matching footrest. His window had a

view of the large granite water fountain that was surrounded by shrubbery in the courtyard. As I was fixing his pillows behind his head when he started to drift off into sleep again and I wondered if he had specifically asked for a room on this side while they were stitching him up.

Jamie's family lived in the green hilly areas away from the river and the graffiti and the good taco places. I was part of the crowd that passed by the river like it was nothing and stopped noticing the graffiti unless there was new graffiti on top of the old and went to the good taco shops every Saturday morning.

Jamie and I met in our freshman year of college in a Government class we were both taking for our major. He sat next to me on the first day, smelling of cigarettes and expensive cologne. I still remember what he wore: a yellow pullover, shorts, and boating shoes. Nothing matched. If he had been anyone else, I would have judged him the entire class while making conclusions about how many girls he had tried to sleep with the weekend before and which student in the class he would pay to write his essays.

But he wasn't anyone else. I felt it when he turned toward me.

Jamie and I started engaging in small talk before and after our one and only class together. It was a comfortable routine that I was fine with leaving as is – but he wasn't and soon he convinced me to want more as well.

I thought Jamie was weird for wanting to date me: a girl from the 'bad side' of our hometown. A girl who was able to attend our university because of donors and rich businessmen who wanted tax cuts and to feel good about themselves. The men who threw away the thank you letters I sent when the scholarship checks deposited lived in the same neighborhood as Jamie's family.

I forced myself to feel comfortable with Jamie paying for everything from jewelry to dinner to my tampons at CVS. When I got paid from my on campus jobs I would attempt to pay him back with homemade dinners and movie dates. He insisted that if he didn't spend the money his mom put into his account on me then it would just be sitting there accumulating and occasionally being spent on "beers for the bros."

Three months after we began dating, I let Jamie come with me to my side of town. It was painful. My stomach was in knots as he drove the highway and crossed over to where I had grown up. His first reaction was to ask me why there was a dog in the road and if we should take it back to its owner. I informed him that that wouldn't be the last one he saw, and we should only get close to it if he wanted to get rabies.

It was after I told him this that I noticed the look on his face change from worry about the dog to worry about his safety.

As he drove us deeper into the west side of our city, he grew quieter.

"Jamie, you can say what you wanna say." I lowered the volume on The Strokes song he had been playing.

He shook his head, then opened his mouth, then shook his head again.

"Ja-"

"You live here?" he finally blurted.

I shifted in my seat. "Just around the corner." He was silent again.

"Tacos," he finally said.

"What?"

He pointed to a restaurant with peeling red paint and metal bars over the windows. The words ‘Taqueria La Candelaria’ were drawn in cursive on the side of it. “Is that the place?”

I came here every Saturday with my dad since I was ten until I moved 20 minutes away from our house to go to college. I had been promising to bring Jamie to the taco place, but I had been putting it off because it meant bringing him to *this* side of town.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

We got off of his black Audi and went inside where I ordered for both of us in Spanish. The old Mexican woman at the cashier raised her eyebrows at me and said, “That’s not your dad,” in Spanish.

I laughed, “No, it isn’t.”

“Es tu novio?” she almost yelled, her brown eyes bulging.

I nodded. She smiled, winked, and gave me the receipt and my change.

“You never use cash,” Jamie said, eyeing the bills in my hand.

“They only take cash here.”

“I like that, very old school,” he said marveling at the green walls with palm trees and Aztec pyramids painted on them.

The rest of the morning I sat through Jamie ranting about how he had never had such a great taco before and how his life has changed for the better. “I mean, this is actually real Mexican food! What have I been eating all my life?” he said.

Jamie and I were both Mexican American. Both from the same culture, but only one of us had really experienced it. I felt bad for him, but I know he felt worse for me because of how he perceived I grew up – with stray dogs and graffiti all around me. There was no way to make him

understand how normal it all was: talking to the cashier in Spanish and passing by the river every day.

I thought about all this while sitting on the recliner the nurse had brought me to sleep on. The beige seat was an eyesore that didn't match the rest of the room. I wondered if she had wheeled it from the old side of the hospital as I sat waiting for her to bring me a pillow and a blanket.

She walked in silently and handed me the white linens. "How are you feeling?"

The nurse had been sweet to me, though I'd only really been paying attention to Jamie, "Oh, I'm okay. Better than him," I said, trying my hardest to give her a smile.

The nurse chuckled, "Him? Oh honey, he's better than both of us. He's on cloud nine right now. Don't worry about him. Let me know if you need anything else." Her grin didn't reach her blue eyes with purple bags under them. Her hair had been beginning to fall out of the bun on top of her head. As she left the room, she pulled her hair tie out and let it fall.

"Wait!" I said trying to yell in a whisper.

Her long hair whipped as she turned back turned around and walked back over to me, "Yes?"

"He's on pain meds, right?"

Her eyes got big and she smiled, "Ohhhhh yes. Major pain meds. He doesn't feel anything. Please try not to worry."

"Yeah, see, that actually makes me worry more."

She gave me a questioning look and I began to explain:

Jamie had been nursing a growing pain killer addiction since he broke his leg playing soccer in his junior year of high school. I wasn't aware until it became too obvious to ignore.

Jamie always seemed to be in high spirits - that's why I fell in love with him. His bright disposition and endless energy made me want to be the same way. At first I did mimic him, until I got tired of his multiple last-minute plans and impulsive behaviors from changing his major once every few months, trying to get into physical fights with his frat brothers over who stole his socks, and binge drinking every other day – it all got old.

His moods would change from loving and caring to hateful and spiteful. Jamie would go from singing those cringy John Legend songs to me from the passenger seat of my car to yelling at me and accusing me of trying to kill us if I made a wrong turn – within 30 minutes of each other. Whenever something like this happened, I tried to convince myself he was messing around, but I was never sure.

Six months into our relationship I was editing a paper inside of his apartment while he went to the gym. I was trying to find a red pen to mark up my own essay when I discovered a different kind of pen in his backpack. When I tried to press the end cap, I noticed it didn't click. The pen I had pulled out was missing its plastic tube that would have been filled with ink. Instead, there were about 6 tiny, white pills hidden inside of it.

I twisted the cap of the pen and turned it upside down to where the pills fell on my palm. They had an 'OP' on one side and a '10' on the other. I typed in 'white pill with OP and 10' into Google and the word 'OxyContin' came up. Googling told me everything I needed to know about the drug - addictive, causing sporadic mood changes, impulsivity, unwarranted anxiety, lethargy, weight loss.

I sat at Jamie's desk thinking about how to confront him about the pills. Maybe he was holding them for someone, maybe he found the pen on the ground at his frat, maybe he was going to throw it away?

When he got back to his apartment from the gym an hour later, I showed him the pen. He said nothing and locked himself in his bathroom before showering. When he got out, he sat on his bed and said, "They're mine. But they're old." And I believed him when he said he didn't feel like he could throw them away yet even though they were part of his past. They were like a security blanket, he told me. He explained how he became dependent on them while he was healing from his broken leg in high school and how even after the cast was off, he couldn't stop taking them because they made him feel happy.

He told me he got them from his frat brothers, low-key drug dealers, and by making appointments with different doctors every few months where he would complain about a new pain in another part of his body.

"When my dad divorced my mom, I was in so much pain, Cat," Jamie said. "They helped."

He explained how his dad's leaving and the end of his high school soccer career both came together to make him dependent on something that would take his hurt away. I believed him.

But it only got worse.

After another six months of watching everything he put in his mouth, I realized I couldn't be with him every second of the day. Finding pills and throwing them down the toilet and not saying anything because I was too afraid to lose him and too afraid of him not wanting me

because all I wanted was the real him. The thing was, back then I didn't even know who he really was because he was always high on pills.

It was a little after our one-year anniversary when I heard a voicemail he was listening to because his volume was too loud. A reminder for a doctor's appointment, a new doctor, a new doctor who he would ask for more pills from. He didn't notice I could hear so after the message finished, he locked his phone and closed his eyes to doze off.

I got up from the couch and began to stuff the small amount of clothes I would leave at his place into my bag. He woke up from my movements and asked where I was going, I told him I had to leave him because he wouldn't get better.

"No, Cat. No, no, no, no, no, Cat. I'm getting better, please stay. Oh my God, Cat, please stay," he said, grabbing my bag away from me.

I pulled the bag back towards me, "Jamie! You said you were done with them! I knew you weren't but I - I hoped you'd just stop but you can't." I said through tears. My hands were clasped around my canvas bag and my legs were shaking. I began to walk backwards toward his door.

He bolted towards me. His hair was covering part of his face and I couldn't tell if his pupils were bigger or smaller – a clue Google had told me to look for to see if he was high.

I had never felt scared of Jamie until then. He wasn't as buff as he had used to be when we first met – he had lost so much weight, but he was tall. I had walked so far backwards that my back was against his door. He put his arms on either side of me and placed his hands on his door, locking me in front of him.

"Jamie..." My heart was pounding, and I was bouncing up and down on my toes

“Cat, you can’t leave. I need you.” He looked down at me. His hair touched my forehead.

“Ja –”

“Cat, I love you.” There were tears in his eyes. I had never seen him cry at this point and something in my stomach tightened. All I wanted to do was hold him.

“Please talk to me,” he said.

“I –”

“Cat.” His voice cracked as he said my name, “Cat, I want to get better.” He was beginning to hyperventilate, “I want to get clean, Cat.” He started to sob, “Cat. P- Please. Oh my God, please.” Jamie moved his hand from the door to my shoulders, “Please help me get clean, please, I just want to get clean. I love you, I love, love you.” He pulled me from the door towards his chest. My arms stayed by my sides through this. That is, until he lost his footing, collapsed, and took me with him.

His body convulsed with sobs as he held me to his chest on the floor. His cries were filled with so much pain that I felt as if it was being transferred from his body to mine. I began to cry too and found that my arms had wrapped around him. I brought his head to my chest and told him I loved him and to breathe and that I was there.

So, I stayed there. And he did get help. Even so, I kept a bottle of Naloxone with me in my backpack, and in my purse, and in my bathroom – always cautious of an accidental overdose. But I never had to use it.

He went to rehab, telling his mom it was for stress. When I dropped him off at the facility his mother, Ms. Campo, was waiting by the sliding doors to walk in with us. She had demanded Jamie tell her which center he would be entering, once she got this information she asked when

he'd be dropped off – in hindsight, we should have put two and two together and understood she'd be there.

While Jamie filled out the insurance paperwork, she badgered him with questions. “What are you stressed about?”

“Ma, I’m filling this out.”

She took the clipboard from him, “I’ll do it. I know everything on here.”

When a nurse came to take him to the back from his evaluation Ms. Campo put her hand on his shoulder and offered to go with him. He let her. I suspected it would have been easier to tell her about his addiction with a stranger in the room so she would have to keep her composure.

After his evaluation I said goodbye to him and was left with Ms. Campo in the waiting room.

“Are you alright?” I asked her.

She was fidgeting with her purse, “Of course I am. He will be too. I really think this place will help him with his stress. My poor mijo.”

I cleared my throat, “Um, yes. We read that they have good outcomes with addiction and substance abuse.”

She cupped my cheek with her hand, “Thank you for being here, Cat. But he’s not a drug addict. He’s just stressed.”

Even with his mother’s denial he went to counseling and he to Narcotics Anonymous. It took two years, but he was better. And I finally knew him for him – not Jamie on drugs but just Jamie, my Jamie.

Until the crash.

“Well, did you think he wasn't going to be on pain meds?” the nurse asked me. She had listened to my story and had a look of genuine concern on her face. Her hands were in the pockets of her bright pink scrubs that contrasted from the white and gray tones in Jamie’s room.

“I mean...I wasn't really thinking about it until now.”

“We have programs that can help him, hun.”

“Yeah but the thing is, he was already helped,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Then he can be helped again, Miss...”

“Catalina.”

Her hand left her pink pockets and they found mine, “Please don't worry, Miss Catalina. He was clean once; he’ll be clean again. And he'll have his family and you. And, oh, it’ll all be okay, okay?” She took her arms back. But her face changed, and she bit her lip. “We can talk to him about cutting back on the pain medicines though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the PCA pump he has right now...whenever he presses the button after a certain amount of time it gives him more pain killers. It's not a free for all, but if you say that Jamie does deal with....an addiction then it's best if he doesn’t have control over it.”

I felt like I was going to explode.

She raised her hands as if she could see my brain buzzing, “But we can switch to oral medication if he abuses the button. I’ll have to talk to him about this in the morning.”

I nodded as I picked at the skin around my right thumb.

She changed the subject. “When will his family be here?”

Before Jamie drifted off to sleep, he had instructed me to call his mom in the morning and make it seem like it wasn't a serious accident. Of course, he said this high on pain meds, but I listened either way.

A seven thirty, a few hours after the nurse had left me the uncomfortable recliner, I called his mom to tell her Jamie had been in a wreck. I listened to Jamie and told her it wasn't a horrible crash and that he was fine – a half lie, it was a horrible accident, but he was, in fact, fine. She informed me that Jamie's older sister would be there before her, but that she would be getting dressed and leaving her home as soon as possible. As she spoke, I noticed how my head was pounding and how I was still in my clothes from last night that no doubt had a stench.

I went down to the lobby to bring his sister, Mallory, to him. I had also told her that Jamie was not *that* hurt and was still asleep when I left his room.

"What even happened?" she asked looking down at me. Mallory was very pretty and very tall, just like Jamie. At 27, she had just become our town's co-anchor for the 10pm news. Her schedule forced her to sleep late into the morning in order to look her best at night. In other words, Mallory was not used to being awake at this time. It showed in her bloodshot eyes and her tangled hair that was pulled back in a low ponytail. I had never seen her without makeup until that moment. I realized just how tired she must've been having gotten home late at night.

"Mallory, do you want to get some coffee first? He's still asleep and I can tell you all about last night."

"You *must* need some," she said. I didn't know if this was a dig at my own appearance, which must have looked worse than hers, or a form of praise towards me for being there for her brother.

As we followed the signs to the cafeteria, I told her where she could find all his cuts and how his left leg continues to twitch and lose feeling every few minutes. While talking I noticed the abrupt change from the clear white lights to harsh yellow ones and the marked up brown tile underneath my sneakers. We were on the old side of the hospital now. The unappealing light and the smell of what could either be death or dust filled my nostrils.

I filled the cup with coffee from a dispenser that looked taller than I was, “Are you getting any?” I asked her as I added creams and sugars to my large cup.

“I would, but I shouldn't.” Mallory began to tell me how she stopped drinking caffeine because her mother read an article that said it killed the eggs in women's uteruses. I was too tired to correct her latest discovery, so I stayed quiet as she went on.

Jamie's mother and sister were nice enough, but they were cold and somewhat unwelcoming, either intentionally or unintentionally. They made no real strides to get to know me. And I know they didn't approve of the side of town I grew up in.

“Will you?” I suddenly heard Mallory say.

My head shot up from the excessive stirring I was doing to my coffee. “Huh?”

“Will you be here when my mom gets here?” she asked. How she got from the eggs in her uterus being murdered by Starbucks to asking me if I would stay to greet her and Jamie's mom was beyond me, but Mallory did have range in conversation.

“Oh! I mean...yes, of course. Why would I not?”

Mallory moved her shoulders uncomfortably. “No reason. My mom just wanted to know. Ya know?”

We walked back up to Jamie's room as she told me about this new diet her mother was making her try out for the month – she had noticed her daughter had gained a few pounds and told her it 'Just wasn't good for the camera.' When we got to the room we stopped by the door and she asked, "Do you think he's awake?"

"He's awake," we heard from behind the curtain.

"Jamie!" Mallory said, shoving her cup of tea into my free hand and pushed aside the curtain hiding her brother.

She went on and on about how she couldn't believe the call from their mom this morning and how she kept thinking she was going to wake up from a 'fever dream' as she called it. I put Mallory's tea down on Jamie's side table and sat on the recliner the nurse had brought me to sleep in.

"You look bad! Cat said you were fine?"

"I'm fiiiiine," Jamie said, slurring his words. His thumb was pressing the button of the pump that allowed more pain killers to enter his bloodstream.

My eyes looked toward the button and its cord. The nurse had not come to talk to him yet.

"Hey, I have to call my mom," I announced. They both looked at me and nodded.

"Tell me everything," Mallory begged her brother, even though I just had.

I walked out of his room and looked for the nurse I spoke to about his addiction last night, but she was nowhere near. I walked down the hall toward the nurse's station.

"What was her name?" the nurse sitting at the computer asked.

"I don't know, I just know she was helping James Campo in room 1134."

“Mmm, that’s Nurse Kelly. She’s working a double, so she’s still here.” She looked back up at me. We stared at each other. I didn’t know what to say. Send her now? Call her? Page her? She blinked at me and tapped her long nails on the desk. “I’ll tell her to go into the room.”

I bumped into Mallory back at Jamie’s door. “Ma’s here,” she said, grinning at me. “You wanna come with me to get her?”

I looked over at Jamie over her shoulder. He smiled bigger than I’ve seen him smile in a long time and my stomach felt sick. I knew why he was smiling – because of how he was feeling. Because of how his button made him feel. “Go with her, Cat! Mal will get lost if you don’t!” He laughed loudly.

Mallory turned to laugh with him and then back to me, “Wow, he’s in such good spirits.”

Ms. Campo was wearing her signature tan sweater and dark jeans with her designer boots and held an iced coffee in her hand. “Oh my!” she began. “This hospital has really changed. Last time I came here to visit my cousin I felt like you needed to take a shower right when you walked in,” she laughed. “Mallory! I told you not to drink coffee.”

“It’s tea,” Mallory said, looking down at her own boots. “But Ma, you’re drinking coffee?”

“Yes, but my eggs are already dead or dying,” she replied.

And then she turned to me.

“Oh Catalina! You look terrible!” she said, taking in my eyebags and tangled hair and probably the smell.

“Hi, Ms. Campo. I’ve been here all night. I’m sorry I haven’t had time to change or shower,” I said, wishing there was a hair tie on my wrist at least.

Her face looked to be on the borderline of disgust. “Well, you can go home now and change and maybe brush your hair too.”

“Let me take you upstairs first.”

She looked me up and down again but nodded anyway.

It was Mallory’s job to explain Jamie’s cuts and the atypical fracture in his leg. The first thing she said was that it actually was pretty bad and that I had toned it down over the phone.

Together, we walked Ms. Campo towards his room.

“Mi hijo! James! Jamie!” she screeched.

Jamie, engulfed in her embrace, quietly said, “Mom.”

I watched Mallory’s face as she observed her mother and brother’s loving interaction – of course, her brother had almost died. Through the years I’d known the family, I had seen that even at times when Jamie was not hurt. Ms. Campo always showed more love towards her son, more acceptance.

“Catalina, you can go home now. I’ve got him,” Ms. Campo said, fidgeting with all the cords that were attached to Jamie.

“No, Ma, she can stay.”

“James, she’s been here since last night. She hasn’t slept. She’s a mess. She needs to go home. It’s not like she’s far away from it.” She then lowered her voice and repeated, “She’s a mess.”

Mallory took my spot in the recliner and got on her phone, unfazed by this conversation, knowing she had no place in it.

“I think I’d like to stay and see what the doctor says,” I said, gripping the coffee I still hadn’t even sipped in both of my hands.

Ms. Campo turned back to Jamie. “You haven’t seen the doctor?”

“I – uh I don’t remember...Cat?” he asked, looking at me with his dilated eyes.

“There was a doctor in the ER, but he hasn’t come back to check on him.”

Ms. Campo nodded. “What on earth happened?”

I wasn’t sure if it was directed at me or Jamie. But he spoke up. He explained how he was supposed to be picking me up when the crash happened. I looked down at my sneakers during this exchange.

“She couldn’t drive herself?” Ms. Campo asked.

Jamie said nothing.

“James, you’re supposed to be studying for the LSAT, not picking up your girlfriend from a party. Focusing. To be a lawyer, James.”

“It was supposed to take 15 minutes.”

Ms. Campo shook her head. “Her family’s home is way further from your apartment than 15 minutes. That’s an hour of studying lost.” She sighed loudly. “What time was this?”

Jamie looked at me for help.

I bounced on my feet. The anxiety of knowing she wanted to yell at me and blame me lingered in the air and what I was about to tell her wouldn’t help either. “About one in the morning.”

Her eyes darkened and her lips pursed. But she turned to Jamie. “And why did I hear about it at eight? I thought it happened this morning?”

“I -” Jamie began.

But Ms. Campo had a realization. “You called her first,” she said as she pointed at me without looking at me. “You called your girlfriend first instead of your mother, James!”

Jamie knew he was in a crunch. But instead of talking back to her I noticed his right-hand reach for his button.

“Jamie!”

Both Mallory and Ms. Campo looked at me.

“Why are you yelling?” Ms. Campo asked, annoyed with me even more. First, she finds out she’s no longer her son’s first choice and then his first choice starts making a scene.

And then I realized now was not the time to bring up his past and, most likely, future addiction. “I’m just, I’m also angry that he didn’t call you first.”

She narrowed her eyes and tapped the handle on Jamie’s bed. After a few seconds she had another realization. “Mal, text your father about James.”

Mallory said nothing but I noticed her fingers typed on her phone more rapidly.

Jamie shook his head as he tried to sit up straighter in his bed. “Ma, please don’t call dad. I just want you all here right now. We can tell him later.”

“Really? You want me here? Funny because you didn’t even call me first.”

“Ma...”

But before Jamie could sweet talk his mom Nurse Kelly was back.

“Oh, hello everyone.” She was in the same bright pink scrubs from earlier in the day.

“Are you two family?”

Mallory nodded while Ms. Campo said, “I’m his mother.”

Nurse Kelly beamed, “Oh, wonderful! There is something I need to talk to James about very quickly. Can I have you all step out for a few minutes?” She motioned to me, Mallory, and Ms. Campo.

Ms. Campo scoffed. “No, we will not. *I’m his mother*. I can be here. We’re staying in.”

Nurse Kelly looked frightened. “James, is it okay if I talk to you about your PCA pump in front of your family?”

“What about it?” Jamie asked.

“Uh, about taking it off.”

Shit. I gripped my coffee cup.

“Why?” Ms. Campo asked.

Nurse Kelly motioned at me, “Well, Cat here told me about his medical history, and it might be best to do without it.”

“Why would it be best for my son to be in pain?”

“Oh, he won’t be in pain, ma’am. It just might be better to give him monitored pain medication...because of his history.”

I began to tap on my coffee cup. I could see Jamie looking at me from the corner of my eyes.

“What history? He’s healthy. He’s always been healthy. I don’t want my son in pain. Do not take that pump or whatever off of him.”

“Well, patients with a history of addiction are usually discouraged from using the pump because they abuse it.” Nurse Kelly’s voice was getting softer and her hands were back in her pockets.

Ms. Campo let out a laugh, “Excuse me? Addiction?”

Mallory sat up straighter in my recliner. “What are you talking about? Jamie, what is the nurse talking about?”

Jamie was sweating. The fluorescent lights of his hospital room allowed me to see the streaks of sweat coming from his hairline, “I – uh...Cat?”

The nurse finally caught on. “I’ll come back,” she said, the door closed softly behind her.

I cleared my throat, “Jamie this isn’t my thing to talk about...”

He shook his head and started scratching his arm. “Well, I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

“But,” I began.

“You brought it up; you explain. God, I *hate* that I can’t walk away right now!” he groaned, kicking the bed with his good leg.

Mallory repeated the only line she seemed to know, “What was the nurse talking about?”

I began, “Ms. Campo, you must remember when Jamie went to rehab two years ago? The nurse was talking about his opioid addiction.”

Her head shot up, “That was for stress.”

“No, it was for his addiction.”

“My son is not an addict. He was stressed.”

Mallory finally interjected, “I need to know about this, and I need to know about this now.”

In a quick succession of choppy sentences, I explained Jamie’s opioid addiction from beginning to end. I felt the guilt that Jamie couldn’t feel at the moment because he couldn’t feel anything bad.

One of them finally spoke, “Mallory, get up I need to sit down.” I supposed the retelling of events she already knew about but denied was too much for her to handle.

While Mallory stood up from my seat she started laughing. “Ha-ha-holy shit.” She walked over to stand next to me. We both leaned against the wall with our cups in hand.

On the other side of the room, about six feet away, Jamie was trying to get his mom’s attention. But Ms. Campo was too preoccupied staring at the tiled floor.

“Mom,” Jamie said as he tried to reach out to hold her hand. She pushed his cut-up hand away from her. He tried again, and she slapped it away.

It was silent for what felt like three hours until Ms. Campo finally spoke. “No, it’s not true. You said you were stressed. You’re in college. You just did a little drug, everyone does it. You’re fine.” She started shaking her head.

“Uh, I never did drugs in college.” Mallory laughed.

They both ignored her.

“Ma, you were in the room with me when they went over my treatment plan. Remember? You don’t just go to Green Hills for stress. I had a pill problem. It was for rehab.”

Ms. Campo was quiet again. I felt my head get heavy and my eyes glaze over. I hadn’t slept and it was starting to hit me. I yawned and she noticed.

She pointed at me with her perfectly manicured finger. “It's your fault. Your horrible influence with your ghetto family! And the drug deals you no doubt grew up around! You ruined my son!” She was on the verge of screaming. My body stiffened and I gripped the roll-away table that was next to me. I squeezed on my coffee cup, afraid that the top might come flying off.

Jamie sat up straighter than he had all day, “Mom! This started in high school with soccer. I told you this already, and did you not hear Cat when she explained to Mal just now?”

She shook her head no. “Mijo, she’s always been after our money. I knew it from the first time you brought her over.”

Mallory still had a smile on her face. No doubt elated at the fact that her brother was no longer the golden child. “2014...isn’t that when you and dad finalized the divorce?”

“Oh, so you’re blaming me now, Mallory?” Ms. Campo asked.

Jamie groaned. “Ow, it’s hurting a lot now.”

Ms. Campo turned her attention to her son again. She pressed his PCA pump button for him.

Jamie took the cord and pressed it himself. “What the fuck, nothing is coming out.” He pressed it again and again.

“It's not unlimited, James,” I said.

He groaned.

“James, we’re getting out of this horrid hospital and going to the one on *our* side of town,” Ms. Campo said as she pushed his blankets off of him and pressed the call button on his bedside table. “We need to find you a wheelchair. I’m going to call for them to get a room ready.” She grabbed his arm.

I pushed away from the wall and walked toward her. “You can’t do that. They’re treating him here. You can’t just take him away.”

Ms. Campo scoffed. “You can’t tell me what to do, little girl. I’m doing what’s best for my son.”

“He can’t leave!”

She tried to help Jamie out of bed as Nurse Kelly walked in. “Ma’am! What are you doing?”

“OUCH. Mom that hurts. Stop! Please,” Jamie begged.

I ran in between Ms. Campo and Jamie. I pushed her away from him. She slapped the hand that was holding my coffee away from her and the cup’s cold contents spilled all over my blouse.

“Oh my god, Ma!” Mallory exclaimed, suddenly pulling me away from her brother and mother.

Ms. Campo looked at all three of us and silently left the room.

“I’m sorry, I have to see if she’s okay,” Mallory said. “I’ll bring paper towels when I come back.” She looked apologetic. She looked tired. Always having to look after a mom who never saw her.

I turned to Jamie and tried to wring out my dripping shirt.

He was crying, “Oh my God, I’m sorry, Cat, I’m – I’m so sorry. I –”

“It’s fine, Jamie. It’s cold anyway,” I said.

“At least it was cold coffee,” he said, repeating what I had just said. Under his blanket I saw his hands move towards his PCA pump and his index finger press the button three times.

“And this is so warm,” he continued smiling at me. Slowly offering me his hand.

I took it.

A MEANINGFUL CONTRAST

“I was standing on the roof looking down. It was a nice view. People everywhere. They all looked so small and –”
“That’s not what Matthew said.”

I was sitting cross-legged on the polyester couch with my hands neatly folded in my lap. I waited for her to continue with whatever she was going to say next. *There was always more with Dr. Ruiz*, I thought to myself as if she were an old friend who I knew very well – even though I had only met her a week and a half ago.

My ex-boyfriend, Matthew, had found me on my 15-story apartment building’s roof a few days after I ended things with him. Apparently, I had called him crying and talked about the roof. He hung up the call and came to check up on me. And then he found me. I guess I had lost it for a bit and had a panic attack or an anxiety attack (I really don’t think there’s a difference between the two) and Matthew called an ambulance.

I don't remember anything from that evening or night. I woke up in the hospital to Matthew's hand holding mine. I had broken up with him because he was always there. Always watching me, always asking to see me, always asking about our future. My disinterest in him began to turn to hostility. But even in the aftermath of our relationship I couldn't shake him. He had even called my parents to tell them what had happened. I had to text them and tell them not to come see me and blocked their numbers. I told Matthew that he better not tell them what hospital I was in before I kicked him out of my room.

The nurses who evaluated me asked if I had thoughts of ending my life. I couldn't remember if I had and I told them this. Though their eyes narrowed, they had no real evidence that I had tried to jump off my roof. They couldn't commit me to their psych ward against my will. After coming back from the restroom in the hospital room I saw one nurse had left a pamphlet for Riverside Heights, the behavioral health center on the outskirts of our town. A place where I could voluntarily commit myself. I flipped through the pamphlet. Thinking about taking time away from my coding project, my parents' meddling, getting away from Matthew's insistent text messages, and this jumbled confusion I felt in my head all seemed like a good idea.

I will admit I was also a bit worried about my memory loss, even though I knew I did not want to jump. I didn't want to feel this way. As I sat on this itchy quilt atop my hospital bed, I decided to fix this problem and go to Riverside Heights. Before it got any worse.

After being discharged from the hospital I took a Lyft back to my apartment. There was no way I was going to call either one of my parents or Matthew to pick me up. I packed a bag of clothes and called another Lyft to take me to Riverside Heights. The thought of being behind the wheel of my own car made me dizzy.

Riverside Heights is on the nicer side of our town's river. It was a long drive with a stranger who thankfully never said one word to me. Since I got discharged from the hospital in the afternoon, I ended up getting to Riverside Heights late in the evening. After being assessed by one of the nurses I signed a paper admitting myself to the center. Since dinner was over all they had time to do was make me fill out paperwork and take my shoelaces. Before I handed over my phone, I unblocked my parents and told them where I was and that they wouldn't be able to contact me for a while. I silently laughed thinking about my mother's reaction to this message. They then sent me to bed, telling me I'd see a psychiatrist "as soon as you opened your eyes in the morning."

The problem with that promise was that I never closed my eyes that night. The yells of a woman down the hall kept me up. She kept repeating, "Let me out! Let me out!" I almost wanted to check if she locked had herself in the bathroom but decided against it.

In the morning, the nurse who found me awake, staring at the white walls in my single room, told me to follow her. She led me to the psychiatrist who ended up being Dr. Ruiz, a short woman with heavy lidded eyes that made it seem like she could be on the verge of falling asleep while she watched you talk.

She continued to look at me as I waited for her to start snoring. I pressed my lips together in an awkward smile and raised my eyebrows – a signal for her to go on.

"He said you were standing on the ledge, on the roof, hyperventilating," she finally continued.

I pursed my lips and shrugged. "Matthew has it wrong."

“And the paramedics do too?” she asked. “They wrote they saw you as...” She flipped the pages of her folder. “‘Inconsolable.’ And the hospital staff said the same. They had to give you a sedative to calm you down. Do you remember that?”

“Well, no, as I was sedated.”

Dr. Ruiz took a long breath. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“I am telling the truth and you still can’t help me. So that’s not my problem. That’s the shitty therapist’s problem.”

“Do you want to see your family today?”

I stared at her and my mind buzzed – as though there was a gap, and something was missing. I wasn’t sure why I was feeling the way I was, numb and helpless. She didn’t push me to speak. Instead, she took a sip from her mug, and when she put it down, it hit the glass on her table. The noise made me twitch and I was suddenly able to move.

My face tickled. I reached to itch it and felt a tear I didn’t know had fallen. She noticed my surprise. “Ella...just answer me this. Do you really not remember that night on the roof?”

“I don’t remember. I’ve told you...I don’t remember the crying, or the ledge – I just remember the people I saw down there.”

She nodded, eyeing me. “It will come back to you. I promise.” She had been repeating this line to me since the first morning I sat on her couch. “But family? Today?”

“They don’t want to see me,” I said imagining my mother sitting next to Dr. Ruiz’s with her judgmental face and clenched teeth.

“They do. They’ve been asking.”

After my morning session with Dr. Ruiz I walked back to my room, passing some of

the young people I had taken a liking to on my floor.

“Ruiz?” Olivia said, sticking her head out of her doorway.

I turned towards her, leaning against the rail on the wall. “She’s the same.”

“Still doesn’t believe you?”

“She said she wants ‘*the truth*,’” I said rolling my eyes and making quotation marks with my fingers around ‘the truth.’

Olivia pretended to gag. “So cliché!”

I didn’t know why Olivia was here. But then again, I wasn’t sure why I was here either. I didn’t want to ask her, but I did at the same time. She seemed normal enough, happy even. Olivia was the one to help the nurses bring food to those who couldn’t get out of their beds. But sometimes I’d be speaking to her and I’d notice a darkness take over her eyes. A glazed look of terror that lasted seconds before the smile was back on her face. I wanted to know – but I didn’t.

“LET ME OUT!”

Olivia and I both jumped in place. Katherine (the one who had kept me up my entire first night here) was being escorted down the hall by two male nurses, each with a death grip on one arm.

Katherine lunged towards me. I gripped the railing on the wall behind me, “Please! Tell them to let me out! Please!”

The nurses were grunting and struggling to keep her within their grasp.

I tried gaining back my composure. “Uh, let her out. You heard the lady.”

Before Katherine could thank me or lunge again, the nurses pushed her forward and down the hall to the right – towards the visitor’s area.

Olivia scoffed, “And they think *we’re* crazy.”

“Honestly...” I said, I wondered how I could be on the same floor as Katherine when I did nothing wrong. I didn’t remember doing anything worth being here. I was there to figure out what happened that evening so that it wouldn’t happen again.

Katherine was long gone by the time I got there to meet my family. The visitor’s area is exactly how I remembered it. Yellow lights, sticky floors, and chairs that you constantly have to keep moving around in because your butt feels like it’s screaming if you sit in one place for too long.

There are paintings on the walls by artists who must have thought they’d have work in museums. But their work only hangs in the museums that showcase the “crazy” and those deemed suicidal. Their artwork put there for distraction when you didn’t want to look at the disappointment you were visiting.

My gray pullover and blue leggings were not thick enough to keep me warm under the vent. I remembered my dad shivering seven years before in this same spot.

It was me sitting in the chair by the window this time.

“Your mom and dad are here to see you,” a nurse said.

“Oh, shit, really? Fuck, I wasn’t expecting anyone. I was just sitting in the visitor area for no reason.”

The nurse pressed her lips together and I could only assume she held in a scream as she turned around.

I grinned but stopped when I saw my mother walking towards me, alone.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Never thought I’d be here again,” she whispered, throwing her purse on the seat next to her.

“Where’s —”

“Outside.”

“Why? Did you tell him not to come? Why would you do tha —”

“He wanted to talk to you alone.” She shifted in her chair, not because the chair was uncomfortable, but because she was. She signaled at me, “Well, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, so you just ended up in Riverside Heights for a vacation? We were very worried, Ella. Worried sick.”

I felt myself going numb again.

“What I really want to know is why you wanted to throw yourself off your apartment building. Are you really that unhappy, Ella? I thought you were getting counseling. I told you counseling would do nothing. Hello? I’m talking!”

“I admitted myself because I’m feeling a little slow right now. I don’t remember what happened. I feel like there’s this gap in —”

She scoffed, “Grandma knows. She told me to tell you she’s praying for you. She’s lit candles.”

“What!” I said moving to the edge of my chair. “WHY would you tell her this? She’s going to give me an exorcism. She’s old, she doesn’t have to know —”

“Ella, there’s nothing wrong anymore,” she insisted. “I don’t know why you act this way. It’s like you so desperately want to be him.” I knew she was talking about my father. “You’re going to get out of here and get back together with Matthew, yes, he told us you broke up with

him all of a sudden. You'll be normal and marry him. He loves you so much. Let him take care of you."

I laughed, "And? What does that matter? I don't like him! Men don't fix everything. Was dad too busy taking care of you that you didn't notice he was depressed? And I guess you do that with your kids too. I can't wait until David is in this seat next."

I regretted this as soon as I said it. My little brother David – four years old.

Her arm twitched. I knew she wanted to slap me.

"I'll come back when you're better." With that she stormed out.

The nurse who I had snapped at looked at me with new sorrow in her face – so I smiled at her. She looked down, annoyed, cursing all the unstable people around her. I continued smirking to myself but stopped when I saw my father walk through the doors.

He sat in front of me and looked around the room, most likely remembering when he had been here. I did the same.

He had been in black sweatpants and cardigan – different from his usual button-down and slacks. His shoelaces gone from his Converse and a look of turmoil on his face.

He attempted suicide after being laid off from his job at the newspaper. In my town men are supposed to be the breadwinners, they're supposed to take care of their families and losing his job meant he couldn't do this anymore. My mother never let him forget it. Her constant badgering of "be a man!" took a toll on his already preoccupied mind.

Preoccupied, because that wasn't the only reason he wanted to die. During his stay in Riverside Heights he was diagnosed with chronic depression. He had been depressed since he was a teenager and never knew it because mental illnesses didn't exist in his family. My grandma who lit a candle for me had done the same for him. When he was sad, she prayed and

pushed him to do the same. Prayed for God to bring happiness to him. When in reality God needed to bring him a therapist and mood stabilizers. My dad's undiagnosed depression, the loss of his job, and my mother's delusions led him to a bottle of pills. He didn't know of any other way to deal with it.

Back then, I had come to see him here. I don't remember much from that conversation, but I remember him looking up at my mother saying, "Well, I guess I was always meant to end up here."

I imagined myself saying this to him now and almost giggled at the parallel which I knew he would not find as humorous.

"Did I do this to you?" he said, looking down at the now present shoelaces on his dress shoes.

"No. I didn't do what they said I did. I was just looking at the view."

He swallowed. "You can tell *me*."

"I just did."

"Ella...when Matthew called us, he was in hysterics saying you were about to jump."

"I don't remember that."

He sat back in his seat and looked around again. "I hate that you're here."

"I hate that I'm here. I mean *here*. It's cold, right here," I said, signaling to the vent above me.

My father shook his head. "Ella, take this seriously."

"I am! I am seriously cold here," I laughed.

He bit his bottom lip and spoke again, "David's been asking about you. He wants to see you."

I didn't speak for several seconds. My breathing became uneven.

"You don't want to see him..."

"I-I-I do."

"Okay." He started to get up, I followed his lead. "Ella," he said gripping my shoulders, "Try to remember what happened. It's there," he said stroking my hair. "Wipe your face. David will get scared if he sees you've been crying."

They didn't allow small children in the visitor's area, so the nurse had to accompany me to the lobby to see him. David was wearing his preschool uniform, holding onto his stuffed bear.

"Ellie!" he said running to me and pressing his fragile body to mine.

"Hi Davy. How are you?" I said into his hair.

"Oh I'm 'kay. You're in the hospital!"

I nodded.

"Are you sick?" he questioned, placing the back of his hand to my forehead, "You don't feel hot."

The touch of his small hand to my forehead made a few tears to fall from my eyes.

If what everyone was telling me was true, if I had tried to end my life, I would have left David. I tried to imagine him being told I was gone forever. I tried to see him walking towards my body. I tried to feel the confusion and, maybe, hatred he would feel towards me as he grew older and understood. No part of me, no deep or hidden part, wanted to hurt David. I didn't want to jump. I couldn't have.

I saw my 16-year-old self asking the same question David had just asked me to my father.

“Are you sick, Dad?” I said sitting in front of his body which was shivering under the vent. I never got an answer, but he looked at me with sad eyes and I knew he was – sick, that is. David was too young to read my eyes.

I felt something bubbling up in my stomach. My lips began to twitch.

I was on the roof. The cold air was hitting my face so hard I had to constantly blink to keep my eyes moist. I walked toward the ledge.

“Yeah...” my voice trailed off. “I’m sick.”

I remembered the way the concrete of the ledge felt on my feet.

“Do you need surd-re?”

Knowing he meant surgery, I shook my head no.

There was Matthew yelling, “NO, ELLA!”

“Well, let me know if you do. I’ll be in there to hold your hand,” David said reaching up to pat my head.

The force of the concrete on my back after Matthew pulled me off the ledge.

“David, come here,” my mother said.

He went back to my mother who looked at me cautiously.

My father spoke what she was thinking. “Ella, I think you need to go inside.” I tried to imagine what they saw: bugged eyes, short breaths, shaking, a look of recollection.

I turned around to go back through the visitor’s room doors. “What time is it?” I asked the nurse.

“4:30,” she said without looking up.

I ran to Dr. Ruiz’s office on the other side of the building. When I got to her room, I gripped the sides of her open door, made eye contact with her, and spoke. “I remember.”

She opened her mouth, I cut her off.

“I always feel sad. Small. Just angry about everything. I hated my boyfriend. He was smothering me, and I thought breaking up with him would help. But I just felt even worse because I knew my mother would be disappointed that I didn’t want to marry him.

“I mean, I already had bad thoughts, like when cars don’t stop when I’m walking in the street and I find myself wanting them to hit me. I always feel small, useless. I went to the roof because I knew I wouldn’t be the small one anymore. And I didn’t know something was wrong with me. No one talks about this kind of sickness. No one has ever talked about it to me. Even though my dad deals with it, we don’t talk about it.

“I wanted to see the world how it sees me – so I went to the roof. And, maybe it did cross my mind to jump. But I didn’t. I was going to get down. I swear I was. Matthew just found me before I did. And I know you don’t believe me and that’s okay.

“I saw my little brother. I never could have left him. Ever. He asked me if I was sick and I remember asking my Dad that, when he was in here. Yeah, he was here before. That’s probably one of the first things I should’ve told you. Runs in the family, I guess. But he was sick...and now I am too. And he, my little brother, could get this way if we don’t talk about it ever. Like some stupid cycle. I want to talk about it.”

Dr. Ruiz shifted in her chair. “You’re not small. And I believe you.” She looked at her watch. “So, let’s talk about it.”

I turned to close the door behind me, feeling as though the gap in my mind was closing and hoping the one between my father and I would as well.

PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS

““T his again? If you don’t have this memorized by now, just drop out already,” said Alison, she always sat next to me in this class. She attempted to whisper, but she said it just loud enough so that those who were still struggling to memorize it around us could hear and maybe, just maybe, take her words to heart and immediately leave the classroom to march to the Dean’s Office and drop out.

“It helps to see the diagram over and over again and copy it to memorize it.” I shrugged, opening my notebook to do just that.

Alison sighed but did the same, “I guess.”

We both began to copy down the diagram our professor was drawing on the board: the female reproductive system. Of course, this diagram made perfect sense to be on the board of an Obstetrics and Gynecology class in medical school. It made even more sense that I had this

diagram imprinted in my mind since my freshman year of college – when I decided I wanted to be a gynecologist.

I decided this in an elevator I took down from my own gynecologist's office. I was 18. It was a week before my freshman year of college was supposed to start. I had my sunglasses on since leaving the examination room to hide my tears and bloodshot eyes.

I had gone in to get an IUD. But as my gynecologist was beginning the process of inserting it, I felt his glove without expecting to and I twitched.

He sat up and sighed, "You aren't ready for this." He threw his speculum down on the table and took off his gloves without looking at me.

I propped myself up on the table with my elbows, "What?"

He finally looked me in the eye. "You aren't ready for an IUD you can't even stay still." He looked at my chart and most likely at my age. "You shouldn't even be having sex yet," he paused looked at my face and continued, "If you were my daughter, I would not allow this to happen."

The doctor was unmistakably Latino. He truly could have been my father.

I couldn't speak, but I felt my heart starting to beat rapidly. I wanted to yell at him. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to defend myself. But he was so intimidating sitting with his arms crossed and his bushy eyebrows arched, judging me.

"...what?"

"I'm not inserting your IUD."

"Can you just do it and warn me before you touch me this time?"

"No, I am not inserting it." He began to stand. "You aren't ready for it."

"I know I am. You just didn't warn me before you touched me. I got scared."

He shook his head, “You. Aren’t. Ready.”

“Please, I’m leaving for school next week, this is the only time I can get it.”

“And that is not my problem. I’m not doing it.”

Tears were falling, hot and fast down my very red cheeks, “Get me another doctor. Get me any other doctor, anyone but you.”

And he did. And I got my IUD inserted because I knew I was ready and this time the doctor warned me before she touched me.

But the feeling he gave me has stayed with me. Humiliation with your intimate body parts in their face. I still think about him in my classes, mostly this class because I wonder if he actually ever sat through it. And if he did, what terrible school did he go to that didn’t teach him to warn a patient before he inserts a speculum inside them? Mostly, I think about what a better doctor I’ll be than he ever was or will be. I never confronted him or his practice. I just never went back.

Since then, whenever I tell people, whether they be part of my family, people I meet at bars, or even people like Alison who sit next to me in class that “I’m studying to be a gynecologist” there is always a sense of unease and awkwardness. As if my want to take care of women’s needs is taboo or that the uterus is just a bit more disgusting and unapproachable than any other body part.

Doctors should take care of their patients. It’s a real radical notion.

“That drawing again?” my roommate, Emery, said as she poured me a glass of wine.

Emery and I were assigned roommates during our freshman year of undergrad. We’ve been roommates ever since. Emery has a way of making bad things into good things. Like

turning dry vegetables into a ratatouille. Badly acted dramatic movies into comedies (with a large popcorn added). And turning hot coffee that becomes cold (because I always seem to leave it out on the counter) into an iced latte before I leave for class.

“Yes, this again,” I said, pulling the glass towards me.

She sat next to me as I studied. “You want me to quiz you on it yet?”

I laughed. Emery had been quizzing me on medical terms since we were 18. I joked that when I graduate medical school, she should get an honorary degree too. I closed my notebook.

“No, I know it. I was just going over it. Hey, do you wanna go out tonight?”

“Are you thinking ‘full face of makeup’ out or ‘sweatshirt and bun’ out?”

“When’s the last time we put on a face full of makeup to go out?” I scoffed.

“I feel like what you’re really trying to say there is ‘When’s the last time we went on dates?’ which is a direct attack on both of us.” Emery took the wine away from me and sipped it.

“Are we pathetic?”

“Depends who you ask.” She muttered inside the wine glass. After a big swing, she pushed the glass back toward me. “Let’s just order dinner and swipe through Tinder aimlessly.” She got up off the chair. Just as I was about to do the same, I felt my phone buzz.

“It’s my dad,” I told Emery with a frown.

“Tell him to call back later because you’re about to have dinner with potential suitors,” she playfully demanded.

I rolled my eyes and then pressed the green button.

“Dad?” I said into the microphone.

“Mia...how are you?” His voice was off and lacked its usual warmth.

My dad always called for a number of random reasons. These ranged from calling to ask if I saw the latest episode of *The Good Place*, if I had eaten lunch that day, if he had seen a stray dog in our neighborhood, if my sister, Lily, was acting out again, if he had a question about a rash, and even if my mom had made a sarcastic comment that hurt his feelings. But all of these calls started with a warm “Mia! Daughter! I miss you! Listen –” and he filled in the blank.

Since I interpreted his voice as cold and worried, I immediately felt cold and worried in my own body. “Dad, what’s wrong?” I said, my stomach began to ache.

“Uh...”

“Dad?”

“Mia...its –”

“Dad, what is it you’re scaring me.”

I heard him sigh on the line, “Mia, it's Grandma.”

I knew that he had driven to visit my grandma and grandpa, who lived five hours away from our town, “What happened?”

“She’s, she’s been keeping things from us. She and Grandpa both. I brought them back with me down to our house. Can you come visit us tomorrow?”

“What are they keeping?”

“Mia, I’d really like to talk to you about it in person.”

I shook my head even though he couldn't see me, “No, no, you know you can’t do that shit to me. You can’t just say something like that and expect me to wait a whole night to know what's going on. So, what’s going on?”

“Mia, please.”

“What’s going on, Dad?”

“Grandma has cancer.”

The next breath that I was about to take got caught somewhere between my throat and my mouth. And instead of allowing myself to become the scared granddaughter I turned to what I knew better, “What kind? What stage? Has she gotten treatment? What route are they planning to take?”

With this Emery came back to sit down next to me, mouthing the words, “What’s going on?”

I shook my head at her and grabbed my pen and waited for my dad to answer.

“It’s stage four. It’s uterus cancer or endometrial cancer, I –”

“Pretty much the same thing,” I interrupted. There was silence from my dad, “Go on...”

He cleared his throat, “Well it’s that and it’s...” I heard paper rattling on his line, “A 20-centimeter tumor and –”

I sat up in my chair so quickly that my knee hit the bottom of the table, “20? Dad that’s very big.”

“Yes, Mia, it is. I felt it. It’s growing out of the uterus or the endometrial or I’m not sure but it’s covering all her woman parts and almost hitting her spine.”

“And what are they going to do?”

“Mia,” his voice got lower and I heard it crack, “she doesn’t look good. She’s just bones. She’s not Mom, I mean, Grandma. They don’t know if treatment would just make her worse.”

I looked at my phone, 7:00pm. “I’m going over.”

My parents' house is only 15 minutes away from our apartment. My dad met me outside of the house. He was wearing his usual beige cardigan that made him look like the Mexican Mister Rogers.

He hugged me. "Thank you for coming." He looked to be almost on the verge of tears.

I attempted to be funny, "Thank you for – you didn't invite me! I just came."

My dad chuckled, "True." He stopped and cleared his throat while looking down at his sneakers. "Mia, you should really prepare yourself before you see Grandma. I wish I could have."

How bad could she look? I'd seen her in the summer before they moved away from our town. It had only been seven months.

I followed my dad into the house. He and my mom bought the house when I was in middle school. The house was much calmer while I was growing up. Lily, my sister, who is in her first year of high school had just begun to create chaos in the house. I've heard stories from my dad about the front door slamming, the kitchen table she ignored them across, and the back door that she snuck out of.

We turned into the living room where a small figure sat wrapped in blankets. My grandma's face was the only visible part of her body. Her pronounced cheekbones that I had never really seen appeared on her very pale face under her gray hair.

Lily was sitting on the couch, not on her phone for once, which I found suspicious. My mom was coming in from the kitchen with a tray that had iced water, pudding, and cut-up fruit on a plate. I smiled at her, but she gave me an apprehensive and uncomfortable look.

My grandma and grandpa never fully learned English – they spoke a broken version of it. I'm guilty of never learning Spanish to communicate with them. They came to Texas from

Mexico before my dad was born. They thought their life would be better here. But even with my grandpa's college degree from Mexico, he found himself mowing lawns and fixing roofs until he met a man who gave him a low-level office job. He had to learn the basics of English in order to succeed, but he was never promoted.

My grandma followed him across the border. She had trouble getting pregnant after my dad and sunk into a long depression that was never addressed. Without an education and without the same push my grandfather had to learn English she found herself thinking she had no purpose in this country. She worked in the kitchen of restaurants instead of raising more children.

Now my grandpa had retired, and he and my grandma were finally free to sit back and relax and see everything else that they had immigrated for transpire: a middle-class son and a granddaughter in medical school.

Instead, my grandma lay on the couch in the house that she has been so proud of my parents for buying. She lay under the high ceilings and the peach-colored walls and above the cherrywood flooring.

"Hi Grandma," I said picking up our dog, Luna, and moving her to the floor so I could sit next to her and her blankets.

"Hi baby." She attempted to turn toward me but stopped and just looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

I didn't know what to say, but I knew what I wanted to say, 'Why did you not tell us about this? What if we could have spent the last seven months with you instead of you rolling up my parents driveway looking less than 90 pounds?'

Instead, I said, "I've missed you," and patted what I hoped was her hand over her blanket.

“I missed you too,” she muttered back.

“Where’s Grandpa?” I said, turning toward my mom and dad more asking them than her.

I heard the bathroom door open. “I’m right here,” my grandpa said, walking toward me. I stood up to hug him. “Hi Grandpa.”

My grandpa also looked skinnier; his signature Adidas sweatpants looked baggier than usual.

My grandpa sat on the other end of the couch at my grandma’s feet and patted them. My family all sat on the couch together in silence. I desperately wanted someone to talk, but I knew that even if they did it wouldn't be about what I wanted it to talk about.

“What exactly is going on?” I asked anyone who would answer. No one did. I knew I had to be more aggressive. “Has it spread?”

“They just did scans to see if it has,” my dad replied.

“A 20-centimeter tumor must have been growing for a long time,” I turned to my grandma, “You never felt it?”

She ignored my question. “Want to feel it?”

I was startled. She was asking me to feel a life-sucking tumor that had invaded her body. I let her guide my hand to her stomach where I felt a large, hard almost rectangular shape. My fingertips went numb as I realized how big this tumor was – it covered almost her entire abdomen.

“How long has that been there?” I asked.

She shifted and motioned toward the tray my mom had brought from the kitchen. My grandpa placed it on her lap.

My dad answered, “She said her old doctor found a small ball in her uterus five years ago –”

“Five?” I asked.

“But nothing –”

“Five!?” I said, my voice rising.

“Listen,” my dad said, “Her old doctor, here in town, found it five years ago. But remember grandma had heart surgery when you were in high school? He said that if she got treatment for that ball that she wouldn’t be able to live through it. Her heart wasn’t strong enough or something.”

“That’s not true,” I said.

“He made me sign paper,” my grandma said, “He made me sign paper to not get treatment. So, he didn’t get in trouble for not helping.”

“He made you sign that to save his ass,” I almost yelled.

“Mia!” my grandpa said, astonished that I knew such a word.

I ignored him, “Did you two understand what that paper really said in the moment?” I asked both of them.

Neither said anything.

“There was no translator in the room? They’re supposed to offer translators. Why didn’t you ask for a translator?” I turned to my parents. “Her heart would’ve been fine! That was like two years before! And now we can’t sue him! He took advantage! She should’ve gotten a hysterectomy the next day!” I turned to my grandma, “It’s literally an in-and-out procedure, they don’t even open you up! It would’ve been gone! We wouldn’t be here right now!”

“We don’t know that, Mia,” my sister said, finally speaking for the first time since I stepped in the house.

“No, I do know that because I’m learning it.”

Lily shook her head, “You’re in school. What? Am I supposed to tell the president how to do his job just because I’m in US government?”

I looked at my grandma, “Let me guess, you’ve been bleeding from...there, right?” She said nothing. “You’re not hungry, you’ve lost weight, you’re weak, you have cramps. Grandma, why didn’t you go sooner? How long have you had these symptoms?” I looked at my grandpa. “How long?”

“Over a year,” my grandpa said.

“And you haven’t been to the gynecologist in the last five years? Or?”

“She was scared. She didn’t want anyone touching her...down there.” my grandpa whispered.

“She didn’t tell me about them. She thought she was just getting old,” my dad said. “She didn’t want to bother us.” I took note of the pain on his face.

“No, she had bad doctors who didn’t want to treat her. And now we can’t get these doctors in trouble because she signed a paper that they didn’t even understand,” I said, avoiding my grandpa’s eyes.

“What would you have done?” my dad said after a long sigh.

“I would’ve fought for treatment. Because none of those symptoms are just ‘getting older.’ You’re only 68, grandma. Just taking the uterus out five years ago would have saved you,” I said trying to talk softer. It took everything out of me to not burst. “The chemo... Grandma, the chemo can only do so much,” I said looking into her tired eyes, “You are so frail, grandma. I –”

“She’s not a doctor,” Lily protested, “You’re not a doctor, Mia.”

“Oh, but when you want advice about birth control then suddenly, I’m a doctor, huh?” I scoffed.

Lily sat up, “No! Because all you talk about is your little IUD sob story and then you start crying. And thank you for telling everyone in the room that I want birth control!”

“Okay!” my mom said raising her right arm and pointing a finger in Lily’s face.

My grandma motioned for my grandpa to take her hand. “I’m tired.”

We all said goodnight. As I watched her stand up from the couch, I saw her ankles and realized my hand could fit around them. My grandpa helped her up the stairs by holding her waist as she took every step. It was so quiet downstairs that I heard her sharp intakes of breath.

“What?” I asked looking at my mom and dad who were staring at me.

“Do you think she’s going to die?” my mom asked.

“I think she had a shitty doctor who might have killed her.”

Lily put her phone down, “She has one of the most curable cancers. She’s going to be fine. Stop being so negative, fuck.”

“Where did you read that, Lily? WebMD?” She said nothing, but I was so sure she had just been reading an article titled ‘Endometrial Cancer: What You Need to Know.’ “Yeah, this type of cancer is curable when it first starts. Five years ago, it was curable. Lily, she is like 90 pounds. It's progressed a lot.”

“Stop pretending you’re a fucking doctor, Mia.” Lily said as she unlocked her phone again.

On the drive back to our apartment, Emery texted me, ‘Everything okay?’

What a dumb question.

I realized I hadn’t eaten since lunch and stopped at a McDonald’s that was connected to a 7/11. The fries made my stomach hurt. Fried food (fried food that was most likely left out for hours in the back of the fast food restaurant just waiting to be reheated and passed to drivers through a small window) and anxiety do not mix. As I sat through the stomach cramps on our couch, I thought about the never-ending cramps my grandma had been enduring for over a year, possibly over the last five years.

I suddenly wanted my stomach to hurt more. I wanted my cramps to become unbearable as hers surely were. I wanted to feel what she had been feeling. I wanted the day-old fries in my stomach to mimic a 20-centimeter tumor and hurt me more.

Over the next few weeks I found myself thinking of nothing but my grandma. Somehow, my wish worked, and her tumor had begun to infiltrate my body as well. But instead of it affecting my lower stomach it wouldn’t leave my head.

I realized that my hands would mindlessly travel to my stomach and touch the part under my belly button – the same part where my grandma helped me feel her tumor. I would touch it and press it and try to feel for a hard mass. I would touch it and press it and imagine what it would feel like to notice a ball there. I would touch it and press it and remember that because of genetics, one day, there might be a ball, then a mass, then cancer.

At the grocery store, I found myself thinking about the slideshow my professor had shown us in my Medical Cell Biology class the year before. This particular slideshow had a picture of different types of food and correlated them to the sizes of tumors. The pea stood in for the one-centimeter tumor, the grape for the three-centimeter tumor, the lime for the five-

centimeter one, the peach for the seven centimeters, the grapefruit for the 10-centimeter tumor.

But I didn't remember if there was a food that correlated to a 20-centimeter tumor. A tumor that big?

No fruit that I had learned to associate with tumors would be able to show me how big the tumor in my grandma was. The only bigger fruit I could think of was a pineapple. I walked toward them, all laying on top of each other in the middle of the produce section. I picked one up and felt its rough exterior. How heavy it was, how hard it felt. I put it in my cart.

Back at my apartment I placed the pineapple on our cutting board. I searched in the drawer by the forks and spoons for our measuring tape that we had only used once before: to see what dimensions our curtains needed to be when we first moved in. When everything was better, when everything was less horrible, when my grandma was dying but we didn't know it yet. She was dying in secret, slowly, and quickly.

I cut the stem off the pineapple and measured it to 20 centimeters, cut it to fit the length, and looked at it on our cutting board.

The size of my grandma's tumor on my cutting board in my kitchen, lying in front of my healthy body, inches away from my stomach where one just like it could grow.

I cut up the fruit and packed it for lunch.

In class the next day, I ate the pineapple before my professor went over the diagram of the female reproductive system once again.

Once she started drawing, we all did, even Alison.

The fallopian tubes, the ovaries, the endometrial lining, the cervix, theca cells, granulosa cells, follicles. I began to feel hatred as I looked at the image. Why was it that this part of our

anatomy brought so much inconvenience to our lives? If I didn't have this organ in my body I, and so many others, would have been saved from emotional trauma, physical trauma, humiliation, and stereotypes. If I didn't carry this organ in my body that doctor would have never been able to scar me like he did. I wouldn't require the men I sleep with to warn me before they touch me. I realized have decided to give my life to caring for an organ that just keeps bringing hurt.

And it didn't look complete to me anymore.

I started drawing a large rectangular box over the uterus. It covered the tubes, the ovaries, the lining, the cervix.

I drew and drew and drew until the box covered the entire organ and it felt complete. It felt complete because that's what I knew was possible to happen. This organ that gives life, this organ that works because of years of evolution, this organ that carried on legacies and names, this organ that made a family and created me and allowed me to be in this classroom.

This organ that brought my dad life is taking hers away.

"What's up with your drawing?" Alison whispered from my right. Before I could make up an excuse, she spoke again, this time more loudly, "Yeah, you're right. Fuck this shit. I'm tired of drawing it." Alison placed her pen down, closed her notebook, and crossed her arms. I did the same.

After class let out Alison stopped me, "Are you going anywhere for spring break?" she asked while stuffing her notebook away in her bag.

"No, not this year," I replied tucking my hair behind my ears and tapping my fingers on my thigh.

“Are you shadowing during the break, then?” She asked leading the way out of the classroom.

“I didn’t even think about that.”

“I am. You should just call or visit some places. Doctors love it when med students come knocking. Makes them feel special.”

Alison waved and went off to get coffee. Following her advice, I texted my dad. I asked him what the name of my grandma’s old gynecologist was – the one who turned her away. I imagined my dad waking my grandma up and asking the random question, her answering and being too tired to ask him why he asked. With her too tired and him too preoccupied with her, no one questioned why I wanted it.

He replied 15 minutes later: Dr. Martin.

A quick Google gave me his office number which I called. I informed them that I was a medical student interested in gynecology who wanted to shadow Dr. Martin because of his reputation. She put me on hold for a long time then said that he had availability the next week on Wednesday to briefly chat. By brief I knew she meant about five minutes.

“Why him?” Emery asked that night after I told her my plan in our kitchen.

I shrugged. “I heard good things about him.” I avoided her eyes. I knew she would want to ask more questions, so I headed to my bed.

She followed me to my room, “I was thinking we could maybe go on a road trip or something!” She was trying so hard to be positive and it was annoying me.

I turned around to look at her standing in my door frame. “Not this year, Emery. My grandma is kinda dying on my parents’ couch. I need to be here, and I need to shadow. Or do you not care?”

She blinked slowly, her mind calculating what to say. Instead, she hugged me. “I get it.”

She didn’t.

When I got dressed to meet Dr. Martin, I made sure to follow the guidelines I had followed for my medical school interviews: professional, no loud jewelry, subtle makeup, not too much perfume.

The waiting room of his practice was filled with older Mexican women. This made sense since his practice was located far away from the river, deep on the West Side where the Mexican American population was concentrated. Most of the women all seemed to speak a sort of Spanglish, to each other, on their phones, and to the receptionist.

The receptionist had tried to talk to me in this form of Spanglish before I told her I knew English, she looked so surprised that it took her a minute to switch from speaking comfortably to the only language I know.

The art in his waiting room included flowers, a younger woman and a newborn, and a photograph of a grandma, her daughter, and the daughter’s baby. Only the grandmas were represented in the waiting room this Wednesday morning. All post-menopausal, none here for an IUD or birth control, none here for a pregnancy checkup – they were past that. They were only here for yearly’s. Something my grandma had come here for. Was one of these ladies to leave the office with a death sentence just as she had?

“Miss Mia?”

My head shot up. “Yes?”

The receptionist motioned for me to come to her window.

“Dr. Martin is ready to talk to you. He doesn't have much time, just letting you know.” She smiled at me. Her scrubs were light blue, and they matched her very long nails and her eyeshadow. “Just step to the back and follow Maria. She'll show you to his office.”

Maria said nothing to me as I followed her down the long hallway filled with pictures of who I assumed was a younger Dr. Martin holding babies he had delivered.

Maria knocked on his wooden door. “Come in,” I heard a low voice mutter.

Dr. Martin looked different from the man who I had just seen on the walls of the hallway. Of course, I expected him to be older – but he was heavier, his face looked more tired and mean, and his hair was completely white and wispy. The babies who he had been holding in the pictures must be about 50 years old by the looks of how much Dr. Martin had aged.

Maria shut the door as I walked inside his office and sat in the chair in front of his very messy desk. It was covered in papers, receipts, and pens, with a single stack of patient files on the edge of it. The walls had his degrees hanging on them. There were no decorations, not one window – the whole room felt cold even though I could feel myself sweating under my blazer.

“Mia,” he began. “I heard that you’re interested in shadowing in the office during your break from medical school?”

I cleared my throat. *Lie now, and then be honest.* “Yes, I’m really interested in pursuing a career in gynecology,” I cleared my throat, “I’ve heard so many great things about your practice.”

This made him smile and show what I was sure to be fake teeth that he bought with money from women like my grandma. “Well, we haven’t had a medical student shadow in a long while...it would be interesting to teach,” he said, more to himself than to me. “Have you started your rotations?”

“That’s next year, Doctor. I’m a second year.”

“Oh right, right, of course. You know the second year of medical school was my favorite. Done with the hard first year, not in the chaotic third year. Just perfect. Enough time to drink with the boys and still finish work,” he said, grinning and surely thinking back to his nights where he should have been studying patient care but was instead drinking heavily.

“What made you interested in gynecology?” I started.

He snapped back to reality. “Oh, just interested in the science of it.”

I saw an opening. “I’m interested in helping people understand their bodies. I’m particularly interested in gynecological care for older women. And I saw your office mostly caters to older women.” He pursed his lips. “Do you see a lot of endometrial cancer?” I asked while my heart started to beat faster.

“No.” he answered, he picked up his pen and tapped it on his desk.

“But it occurs more in women of the age in your waiting room, so surely you’ve seen some?”

He stared at me. “Uh, well, yes I’ve seen some I’ve been practicing for over 40 years. Can’t tell you each instance from the back of my hand though,” he said, frowning.

“Do you treat it?”

“Well...yes. If it's called for.”

“Called for?”

“If it's treatable.”

“And what tells you if it's treatable?”

He smiled. “I’m not a professor, but if you’re interested in seeing day-to-day practice then –”

“Is it not treatable for everyone?”

“Well –”

“It isn’t treatable for my grandma,” I said.

He frowned. “Oh well, I’m sorry about that.”

I had to say it, “Why didn’t you treat her?”

“Who?”

“My grandma, you didn’t treat my grandma.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dr. Martin said, sitting up in his chair.

I sat up as well, “She came to you because she felt a ball in her stomach, and you made her sign a paper saying she agreed to not seek treatment.”

“I –”

“Do you speak Spanish?”

“A bit.”

“You don’t speak Spanish? How can you treat those women out there? None of them were speaking in full English. Your receptionists can speak Spanish, but the doctor can’t?”

“What are –”

“My grandma and grandpa had no idea what they were signing. They didn’t know what was happening, they didn’t know you gave her a death sentence. She had heart surgery two years before! She would’ve been fine for the hysterectomy. Why didn’t you just do it?”

“Miss, I don’t appreciate being attacked like this. I will call security if –”

“Why didn’t you treat her?”

He looked angry, his ears red, “I don’t have her chart in front of me. But if your grandma makes an appointment, I could talk it over with her.”

“She can’t make an appointment because she’s dying! Because you didn’t do anything to help her!”

“You are not a doctor yet, Miss, and if you have a lot of outbursts like this, I can assure you I’ll make sure you never become one.”

“You had a responsibility to help her and give her treatment, not tell her she would die if she at least tried to live. And now her cancer is stage 4, and she can’t even walk. You killed her, Dr. Martin.”

He shook his head and he swung in his chair side to side. “I didn’t. And if you were a doctor you would know I didn’t. Miss, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. If your grandma wants to speak with me, she can.”

“Do you understand that she can’t! She can’t speak English. And most of your patients can’t. They don’t understand what’s happening and you don’t help them.”

He pointed at me. “And that’s not my fault young lady, this is America. Doctors speak English. If you want to live in America, speak English.”

“So, if you can’t understand English, you die?”

“You are not ready to shadow. You are not made to be a doctor.” He paused, looked at my face and continued, “I can tell you don’t have what it takes. Especially if you can’t keep your composure.”

“I am ready.”

“You are not a doctor, Miss. Please don’t tell me how to do my job.”

My breath was ragged, “I – I am ready.” The tears started falling.

Dr. Martin looked at me. “Miss?”

“I’m ready to be better than you are.” There was an air of familiarity around us. Around

our conversation. I could feel it. It made me dizzy.

He scoffed, “Mhm.”

We had come to a standstill in our meeting. I didn’t know what else to say that would make him take responsibility for what he did. I felt frozen and pinched my forearm to come back to my body. I knew I had to conjure something up to leave on my own accord, “You killed my grandma and I hope you know that.” I got up.

Dr. Martin stood up as well. “I have to say I did not appreciate this act of yours. If you are how all med students are these days, the healthcare system is in trouble. But I will say that you should get yourself checked out yearly for tumors. Endometrial cancer is genetic. Tell your mom or sisters too and aunts or whoever is related to your grandma.”

Of course, he had to have the last word. I scrunched my face up and struggled to put the strap of my bag on my shoulder. Without looking at him I said, “Yeah, I know. Thanks.” And I turned to leave.

I ran out of his waiting room with tears still on my cheeks. I passed the women waiting to see him. These women. Foreign. Not helpless but needing help. Trusting him with their bodies only to be sent home to die in five years.

I put on my sunglasses to cover my tears as I waited for the elevator. Knowing what was coming. Knowing the next steps for my grandma. Questioning my own.

These doctors. These doctors who people trust to heal them are hurting more than healing. Creating more cuts than they sew up. I won’t be like them. I will believe people are ready. I will treat an issue when I see one. No matter the circumstances.

I felt 18, but I was 25 in that elevator. Still crying with sunglasses on.

There will be more like her who don't understand what a diagnosis is or will sign a paper they can't read.

I think I should learn Spanish. I should talk to my grandma more. I'm going to study when I get home and draw that diagram over and over and over.

I was ready.

SAINT TOWN

My uncle is the priest. That one with the bellowing voice and the white garments that hurt your eyes when you look at them. The garments that affirm his holiness and purity. That hide him and his body underneath their flowy and heavy nature.

He was young at 45, but old in his practices. It seemed as though he was on a mission to keep the Catholic church as it was when he was young. He is not the new age, ‘all are welcome’ type – though he looks it.

I grew up in this church. This church where my uncle preaches in Spanish at 8am and English at 10am. The church that caters to Mexican Americans on the side of the river where most of them live. The river that the older people’s children and grandchildren cross to be with them on Sundays because they all moved to the other side.

My little body sat in these same pews where I sit now. This same body was dressed in flowing, puffy dresses every Sunday morning after being force fed a quick bowl of cereal. I

never protested these mornings as so many young children I knew back then did. I wanted to wear these white-and-pink dresses that made swishing noises as I walked in my white, securely buckled kitten heels. I wanted the sisters to come up to me and tell me I was a beautiful young woman. I wanted the parishioners of the church faces to melt as my family and I walked to sit in the front pew.

Years later, I'm home for the weekend attending Easter mass with my family. No longer in my signature puffball dresses. Still in the front row. Living in a limbo between college and graduate school. Constantly getting calls from my mom where she begs me to move back home, get an easy job, and marry the guy I dated for three months in high school. I reject these calls as much as I can because I refuse to move back here. I don't fit anywhere in this town, not on this side of the river, not on the other. Though I would like an easy job, any job in this town would be hard because of its location. I don't want to marry the guy I dated for three months in high school because he still lives here, and I don't want to live here.

I think you get what I'm saying.

But I come back for holidays and force myself to hide how different I always feel here. 99 percent of its population followed the Catholic religion. It would be 100 percent, but then I would visit. Being the reason that drove the perfect number down was my secret. I could never tell them I didn't go to church anymore and to not let them know there was a sinner and nonbeliever in their presence.

I don't know what my family would say. Would do. Would think.

My family – whose eyes trail my uncle as if he is the Jesus that he gives so much praise to. His holy presence commands the church he stands in front of, the people who hand onto his sermon and advice – as though the man who has stayed in this city his entire life has the answers

for the world's troubles and heartaches. As if he knows the reasons for terrorist attacks or school shootings so many miles away from where he has made his name.

I may be first to say he knows nothing because if he did, he'd know what I just realized. If he knew we would've made eye contact and he would've cleared his throat in resentment as he did when he found out one of the women in his choir was getting a divorce.

What did I just realize? As I stood here reciting the Lord's Prayer, I thought of the boy I had slept with two months prior – how he never texted again.

Two months ago, and no cycle to have greeted me and let me know that my body was only my own. The sickness that accompanied my days for the past few weeks. The small bloated stomach that I had thought was signally me to do more running. The slightly bigger breasts that filled the only demure blouse I owned that would be acceptable for mass.

Fear filled me. It started from my toes and traveled to my head. I gripped the wooden bar in front of me to balance myself from swaying.

The fear only subsided when I remembered my autonomy.

Two months is still early. Early enough to be able to end this pregnancy at home. As I went through my calendar in my head, trying to decide when I would be able to visit my doctor to get a prescription for the abortion pills, I saw the colors of the stained-glass dance on the floor in front of me. I looked up to see my uncle in front of the cross and remembered where I was.

Here I was, deciding to terminate these cells inside of me while he recited the bible verses, I grew up listening to but didn't hear.

Was I the most horrible person in this church? No. I knew I was not. I grew up here. In this church. In this town. With a gift of hearing and seeing things that others did not want to.

I can help you see it too.

Listen, Listen, Listen.

If you listen, you can hear them. Their undertones with the gospel songs they sing. Their moans, their yells, their cries, their pain, their secrets. You'll hear their bastard children call for them in empty screams because they don't know what name to yell. You'll hear the last words of a woman who is dying because her pain didn't matter. You'll hear their sigh of relief from the drugs they take in the bathroom. You'll hear him whimper as he tries to stop his cries, because men don't do that here. You'll hear the glass that shattered the night before when she found out about his other woman. You'll hear the sounds of pre-marital sex, of the way their children's skin sounds when they slap it, the way their laughs sound as they back her into a corner.

You'll hear it all.

But do you see it?

Do you see it from the podium, Father Uncle?

Do you see it from the back of the church, Sister?

There will be another girl whose eyes sparkle in her Easter dress. Whose face reflects the colors of the stained-glass window who will have the gift to see it all and have the sense to leave.

Because here they want you to be like everyone else.

And maybe her sense of worth won't rely on how well her face reflects the colors, the compliments of others, and the coddles of the sinful people around her.

But when she moves away from the reflection and the sun is gone from her face, she will still feel its warmth in her body. Because she knows this is how it is here, and nothing can be done.

People say that our grandparents and great-grandparents were better. Better workers. Better lovers. Better Catholics. Better Mexicans and somehow at the same time, better Americans. All in all, better people.

But I wonder if the only thing they were better at was keeping their secrets.

And now, generations later they all come out. Everything seems to be getting worse, more sinful. But I think it's us finally being willing to confront our issues and the issues we have with everything around us. It has to get worse before it gets better.

Or maybe, this is just how humans are. Maybe this is just what happens when you immigrate. When you uproot your family. When you force them to adapt to another country that doesn't follow the same values of the one you left.

For it is in this town of rebellion, it is in this place we hide under the guise of our culture, of our God, of others, and sometimes our outward selves. It is here I learned that parts of yourself catch up with you, that the one sitting next to you might be contemplating their next sinful move, that mistakes can produce more mistakes.

Do you see it now?

The tiny, bloated stomach under my dress. How she has to hide the bruises he gives her with long sleeves in spring. His wandering eyes. How every man reminds her of the one who violated her on her seventh birthday. The way her leg won't stop shaking as she sits listening to my uncle tell her that God hates her sexuality.

I hope one day you notice it.

I think you will.

You have to.

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Artist's Biography

Briana Torres was born in San Antonio, Texas, on October 5, 1997. She enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin to pursue a Bachelor of Arts as a double Plan II Honors and English major. She also completed the Creative Writing certificate program with a focus on fiction writing.

Over her college years she has been involved with *Amplify UT Women's Voices*, the *Daily Texan*, It's On Us at UT Austin, and Texas Orange Jackets. She was a Write to Change the World Fellow in 2018.

She graduated from UT Austin in 2020, and plans on attending graduate school to pursue either a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing or a Masters in English Literature. Briana is passionate about advocacy, equity, and representation. Her experience as a student at UT and her involvements helped her realize words are the tools she wants to use to help foster community and understanding.